

THE DYNAMICS OF THE EARLY STATE PARADIGM

Martin A. van Bakel
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Utrecht : I SOR

Medes and Persians in Early States?

Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg¹

Introduction

In 1964 the Professor for Ancient History at Leiden University had a year leave of absence. His introductory ancient history class was taken over by the anthropologist Locher. To their great surprise, unprepared students were treated to a number of exotic terms like Kwakiutl and Potlatch. Locher must have mentioned many more. These are the only ones I remember. Quickly I decided that these primitive peoples and strange customs were of no use. My interest was in Greeks and Romans and civilized habits. That first hour was the last of my first meeting with anthropology. I have later regretted to have missed this early opportunity to get acquainted with the discipline².

My ethnocentrically oriented dismissal of anthropology was not inspired by my teacher, whose best book is generally thought to be *Laconian Studies*, a study of ancient Sparta, in which he extensively made use of anthropological comparisons. This dislike of the Kwakiutl is best explained by a then prevailing attitude among the majority of classical scholars and ancient and other historians. Societies studied by ethnographers were seen as essentially different and the understanding of these "primitive" peoples as irrelevant to ancient and European history.

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² In the sixties, Leiden was in that respect an exceptional environment for a student of ancient history. Den Boer, who taught the subject, was himself a student of Huizinga, had been taught by W.B. Kristensen, the historian of religions, and had very good personal contacts with the De Josselin de Jong family and with the anthropologist Locher. See Locher 1978.

The main characteristics of that synthesis are: a) it is Hellenocentric and sees the world from a Greek perspective, b) it focuses on the personalities of kings, and c) it is modelled on a concept of rise and fall. These three features are easily recognizable as an inheritance from Greek historiography on the Persian empire. It is remarkable that, even though the bias of the Greek sources is usually acknowledged, in some recent monographs on the Persian empire these features are still easily recognizable (e.g. Cook 1983; Frye 1984). One of the reasons for the persistence of this Greek heritage is that chronologically ordered narrative is still the dominant model for historical writing.³

Two monographs produced in the early eighties clearly demonstrate the dependence from Greek models: they are ordered chronologically, by reigns of kings, present the same explanations for the functioning of the Persian empire as the Greeks had done in the fifth and fourth century BC and deviate from these models only in minor details. The Persian empire in this view has a period of vigorous beginnings, characterized by conquest and bravery of the kings, followed by a period of consolidation and organization during the reign of Darius. In the reign of his son, Xerxes, the defeat of the Persian armies by the Greeks signals the beginning of a period of decline which will continue until the final conquest of the empire by Alexander the Great in 330 BC, some 150 years later. Moreover, the well-being of the empire was seen as dependent on the behaviour and personality of the kings, at the neglect of the structure and institutions that must have held the empire together for over two centuries. Plato summarized this view in the fourth century BC: Cyrus and Darius were raised far from the corruptive surroundings of the court and therefore performed well as kings, whereas Cambyses and Xerxes grew up

amidst the spoiling luxuries of the court and were weak personalities and bad kings (Plato *Leges* 694d).

Archaeological research in Iran in this century resulted in an increase of documentation. The adequacy of this synthesis, however, was never really challenged. New evidence was interpreted in the light of the available synthesis and integrated into the overall view of the Persian empire. The model on which the Persian empire was described was therefore, essentially, derived from the possibilities of interpretation available to the Greek classical world. To this "model", the Early-State model presented an alternative which, I think, has benefitted the study of ancient Persia, although its application was neither unquestioningly accepted nor without provoking discussion and the effects of it can probably better be described as osmosis than as interaction. As far as I can see, this applies to much anthropological influence in historical studies.

Early States

It may not be necessary here to discuss what still (or possibly again) mostly characterizes historical research, namely its lack of - or even its adversity to - theoretical discussions. The recent return to a preference for narrative history has contributed to this trend, which for a couple of decades, mostly in the fields of social and economic history, was counterbalanced by debates on methods and theory. Methodological sophistication is not absent from large sectors of historical research, but it is hardly made explicit nowadays. One might wish that it were otherwise, since it would facilitate the discussion with anthropology, but this is hardly the right place to philosophize about the nature of the interrelationships between both disciplines. I will concentrate on the use (and abuse) of the Early State Model, in particular on the way it has contributed to the study of the Persian empire.

First the name. I suspect that there is a certain reluctance to the conscious use of a model that describes political structures as "Early". To many historians "early" sounds synonymous with "primitive" or "underdeveloped". The Persian empire originated, as far as we can see, as the result of a series of conquests by Cyrus

³ This leads rather easily to an ordering of Achaemenid history by reigns of kings, cf. Cook 1983, who followed the 19th century model of Rawlinson in more than one respect (cf. Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987). The most recent discussions of Persian history deliberately opt for a more structural approach, cf. Dandamaev-Lukonin 1989; Wiesehöfer 1993; Briant 1995.

the Great, that made the whole of the Near East and Asia Minor subject to the Persians between ca. 550 and 530 BC. In 525 BC Egypt was added to the list of conquered nations. Mesopotamia or Babylon and Egypt can definitely not be described as Early States: their political developments were millennia old in the sixth century. Their state structures were there for the Persians to take over. The real interesting aspect is now that the Persians did indeed take over whatever there was in these countries, but that they did not shift - at least in the first century not permanently - the centre of power to any of these regions. In their homeland, the modern Iranian province of Fārs, in which important changes in the use of land took place in the late sixth and early fifth centuries, two residences were constructed, Pasargadae and Persepolis, both on sites where few, if any, traces of previous occupation have been found (Stronach 1978; Sumner 1972). During the Achaemenid period settlements and presumably population increased considerably (Sumner 1986). The parts of the administration of Persepolis which have been found (Cameron 1948; Hallock 1969), clearly show intensive activities in villages and on domains around the imperial court (e.g. Koch 1981, 1982, 1986; Lewis 1984, 1990). It is not yet entirely clear how this relates to or overlaps with the last phase of the Elamite civilization which had dominated the area for over 2000 years. Elamite influence and occupation of the territory were obviously diminishing during the seventh and sixth century. Administrative documents and archaeological evidence show a shared use of the territory by Elamites and Persians (Carter 1994).

In the relevant literature have been frequent speculations on the nomadic character of the earliest Persians present in Fārs, in particular due to their elusiveness in the archaeological records. The term "nomadic" was regarded as conveying notions of primitiveness or barbarianism and therefore very often dismissed, without further discussion. More recently, the use of the more appropriate concept "pastoralism" has opened new paths. A growing consensus can be witnessed here: sedentarization in the Fārs went *pari passu* with the increasing importance of the dynasty of Persian kings (Miroshedji 1985: 295; Sumner 1994) and the development of the state organization stimulated the economic

potential of the area. The environment is obviously capable of sustaining intensive sedentarization, as can be seen from travellers' reports in early modern times (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1991). Absence or geographical distance of the court led in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries to decreasing agricultural activities and apparently, at least partially, to a return to pastoral life-styles.

There is still much to be clarified in the archaeological record, but it seems clear that intensified use of land postdates the main conquests and may therefore be regarded as a result of these conquests. Or, in other words, state developments in the homeland were, at least partly, a consequence of the acquisition of an empire outside Iran. Conquests provided the necessary resources for internal developments, as well as the models on which to construct state structures. It may be argued that the phrenetic building activity in the area, first at Pasargadae, then at the immense terrace of Persepolis, served the same ends as the preceding military activities: both types of enterprises united the main forces of the empire and contributed to its formation (Sancisi-Weerdenburg in press). Conquest provided the means with which architecture could make visible and give permanence to the developing institutions.

The subjugated states often had developed well beyond the stages that may be labelled Early States, although the centre of the empire had not yet. It is of some importance to note that those who argue for a more developed and institutionalized state-structure in Fārs, usually use written data (e.g. Briant 1984), among which, almost unavoidably also the Greek tradition, whereas arguments for the absence of formalized political structures in the area heavily lean on archaeological evidence. The debate is by no means a matter of definition only. It affects the whole view of the functioning of the Persian empire. If state developments in the nuclear lands took place under the influence of the surrounding or peripheral civilizations, it is hardly to be expected that the central state could impose its own administrative model on all dominated countries. In the past decade, there was a noticeable shift in descriptions of the Persian empire and a growing tendency to regard the empire far less as a monolithic structure than had been the case in the previous literature. In fact, the model described for

the Maurya empire by Romila Thapar in the 1981 *Study of the State* is very appropriate and helpful. Although at this particular point influence of Claessen's Early State model is very hard to prove, I suspect that - along with some other factors - it may have been more influential in the discussion than might be deduced from protests against it. In the early 1980s it was usually argued that bureaucratic activities in one part of the empire could be used as evidence for their overall presence. In more recent publications one often finds the view that imperial domination varied according to the varying circumstances in the controlled areas.

The case of the Median empire

The main problem in the application of an anthropological model to historical situations is the state of the available evidence. More often than not, the appropriate sources are lacking for the things we would most like to know. Such is the historian's fate: he has to work with what is available. The case of the so-called Median empire is a good example. Evidence for the Median empire which supposedly existed between the late eighth century BC and the mid sixth century consists of three different sets of data: information in the Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform archives mentions the Medes at various occasions in contacts with these writing neighbours; archaeological evidence that mostly comes from a few fortified manors, which were deserted towards the end of the seventh century and were never reoccupied except by squatters; finally there is the description of the Median empire by Herodotus (I 96 ff.).

Herodotus wrote well over a century after the disappearance of the Median empire. Although often used as contemporary evidence, his report can in no way be compared to that of an anthropologist who has actively observed, or even participated in the society he describes. His description is that of a historian who pieces together a coherent picture from scraps of data. It is commonly assumed that oral, possibly indigenous Median tradition was his main source (Helm 1981). The similarity of the names of the last two Median Kings in Herodotus' *Medikos logos* agree with Median king names in the cuneiform sources and their correct

chronological location has led most scholars to believe that this presumed oral tradition was a reliable one and that therefore the entire passage on the rise and fall of the Median empire must contain a correct picture. On the whole, ancient historians tend to be far more confident of the chances that oral traditions may be more reliable than, for instance, many African historians are (cf. Miller 1980; Vansina 1985; for a sceptic discussion see R. Thomas 1989, 1992).

Contemporary evidence for the Median empire is extremely scarce. Therefore Herodotus' data are normally used to supplement the cuneiform sources. When one realises the essentially different nature of these two types of documentation, it is not hard to see why such a procedure is methodologically far from flawless. A reappraisal of the contemporary evidence without the use of Herodotus is necessary. To this purpose I have used the Early State model, in a paper that questioned the extent of state developments in the territory of the Medes (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1988). The available documentation was checked against the criteria developed by Claessen and Skalník (1978). Some of these criteria are of little use in the case of the Median empire. It is impossible to obtain precise ideas on the extent of the Median territory or its boundaries; assessment of population numbers is therefore out of the question. There is no evidence whatsoever to allow us to establish whether or not there was something like citizenship. And on the maintenance of law we would need indigenous sources, which are absent. The list of criteria can therefore only be used as a rough checklist. Still the results are interesting.

In the early seventh century Assyrian records mention Median kinglets who, apparently in groups, were causing trouble to Assyria. Towards the end of the century one Median king, Cyaxares, successfully led his armies against the main Assyrian cities and, together with Babylonians, caused the downfall of the Assyrian empire to its end (610 BC). Much has been made of this in the literature and the successful Medes of ca. 612 BC have been described as professional soldiers: "the group of Iranian tribal warriors had given place to a professional army" (Frye 1984: 78). This professional standing army is clearly an inference from

Herodotus who reports that Cyaxares had reorganized his troops (Herodotus I 103). Professional armies, however, must be kept busy. The remarkable fact is that, except for a clash at around 585 with the Lydians in Asia Minor, we do not hear from the Medes any more. This might, of course, be due to the lacunary state of our evidence. But the Median presence is not anywhere noticeable in the archaeological records. Stated differently, they do not seem to have occupied or used the conquered territory. The main Assyrian cities were looted, destroyed and left unused. If compared to the Persian conquests half a century later, the difference is striking. The Persians kept the existing structures and used them for their own profit. Babylon and Sardes, the capitals of Babylonia and Lydia, became main centres of imperial administration.

The archaeological record shows that there had been going on something in the Median territory roughly before and around the time of Cyaxares' military exploits. At least two - depending on how one defines the Median territory - possibly three fortified manors had been in existence, Nush-i Jan, Godin Tepe and Baba Jan. The existence of these manors, clear signs for social stratification, has been explained by Stuart Brown as effects of Assyrian tax-collecting activity in the Median territory (Brown 1986). External pressure generated the conditions for internal social differentiation. The remarkable fact is now that these sites were deserted at some time towards the end of the sixth century. If Brown's reasoning is valid - as I think it is - the depopulation of the fortified sites may well be due to similar factors as the ones which caused the rise of these sites. The absence of Assyria as a sustaining factor may be the main reason for the end of the occupation. Brown, however, does not draw this conclusion. In a later article (Brown 1988) he supposes that the sites may have been deserted when the chiefs who lived there, moved to the "imperial court" at Ecbatana. The problem here is that Ecbatana has never been excavated, so that we do not know how it looked like in the early sixth century. The absence of any type of stray-finds of the Median period is not very promising. Brown's hypothesis of continued linear development of Median social stratification, however, is less dependent on archaeological evidence, which quite simply is lacking, than on Herodotus' report which places the

main imperial period in precisely this first half of the sixth century. Since Herodotus presents a plausible construction it merits belief (Brown 1988).

As compared to the "Early State" checklist: there are no signs during the sixth century of any tax-collecting structures, nor has anything yet been found that looks like a beginning of the formation of an ideology. There have been no tales preserved on any of the Median kings that are similar to the usual *Father of the Fatherland* type. There are no records or traces of records with the in narrative traditions customary divine signs and omens surrounding the names of these Median kings. Stripped to their essentials, we have just names of kings and little more. There are no signs of Medes taking over the offices of kings of countries they conquered or borrowing their ideological representations in art or writing, as we see doing the Persian Cyrus barely half a century later. No writing has been found in the territory that presumably formed the Median empire. It is not surprising that the Medes themselves did not write (similar to the Persians before 522 BC), it is much more remarkable that as far as we can now see, we have not yet found a trace of them using the developed writing systems from neighbouring subjugated cultures.

As a result of all this, I proposed as a hypothesis that the so-called Median empire has never developed into a formal state-organization. In a following article (1994) I proposed that Herodotus' passages on the empire of the Medes should best be seen as a Greek reconstruction based on information deriving from Babylonian sources, mainly consisting of two names of kings and their military exploits. The subsequent discussion, is, to my mind, revealing of the still low-level of compatibility of anthropological discourse and historical discussions at least in this remote corner of the discipline. There have been two articles responding to the proposed hypothesis and informal discussions during the workshop where the paper was presented. One of the first respondents wondered if I would be happier if we would call the Medes a confederacy of tribes. I would indeed, but I could not convince my discussion-partner that that really made a difference. Terminology is usually applied rather loosely in ancient history. In a paper presented to that same workshop Oscar Muscarella reacted. His

research on Median art had demonstrated that no Median art was as yet securely identified (Muscarella 1987). He did object to the proposition that the Medes might not have had an institutionalized state. He suspected that what I was arguing was merely that the Median empire was not as large as its successor, a question of scale therefore. If there was a king, how could I possibly deny that there was a state? If there was a beginning of social stratification as was visible in the fortified manors of the seventh century, how could the existence of social stratification in the next half century be negated? It was no use arguing that devolution of social stratification is as possible as evolution and that the content of titles, their denotations and connotations can change. Muscarella's methodological position is best summed up by the following quote from his article:

"'The Hypothesis' that there was no writing during the Median period is not justified; it states more than is warranted. The fact that no evidence of a Median writing system has been recovered ought not to indicate that writing did not or could not have existed. A disinterested archaeological and historical position would simply note the record and leave the question open" (Muscarella 1994).

The whole problem at issue here is, of course, how to interpret lacunae in the documentation. This disinterested proposition argued for by Muscarella in fact presumes that there was writing in Median times, but that, quite simply it has not yet been found. It continues the interpretative model of Herodotus without realizing that this not only is a description by an outsider, but cannot be regarded as contemporary. The use of my Early State checklist made it at least possible to apply source-criticism to Herodotus' interpretation.

This particular point was also overlooked by a very recent reaction: Jack Balcer (1994) used the Early State criteria on the Lydian logos of Herodotus and concluded that Lydia indeed was an "Early State". It is again an example of the undifferentiated use of contemporary and much later sources. Greek views on the rise of states are - roughly - similar to our own ideas on this subject as

becomes clear from Herodotus' description of the rise of the first Median king Deiokes. Applying Early State criteria to these Greek reports is like looking in a double mirror.

To conclude with a more cheerful note: archaeologists and Assyriologists have reacted positively and said that this non-statal hypothesis for the Median period contained much aspects that they recognized and found a new stimulus for a fresh look at the evidence. A new analysis of the Babylonian annals aimed at testing this hypothesis is at present being carried out.

Legitimacy

Effects of the influence of the Early State model are more clearly visible on the issue of how ideology functioned in the Persian empire. In less recent literature it was common to interpret the main Persian documents, the royal inscriptions and the palace-reliefs, as personal statements of the kings. The two inscriptions on Darius's tomb were seen as the King's personal last will and testament. Inscriptions by Xerxes which verbally repeat statements by his father Darius were regarded as testimony of the weak intellectual capacities of the king and of his inclination to slavishly imitate. Reliefs produced during his reign were seen as products of his propensity towards estheticism (e.g. Hinz 1967).

In a 1979 monograph Margaret Root analyzed the iconographical elements of the reliefs and argued that the reliefs formed a visual ideological programme. In my thesis of 1980 I came to the same conclusion - not yet aware of Root's work - for the inscriptions. Both results were subsequently used in a paper for the Early State workshops (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1981). Although never published in English, the paper has been used and discussed, most fully in a full length German monograph by Ahn (1992). On a number of points Ahn criticizes or refines my conclusions, in particular on the difference between the process of legitimization and the legitimacy of institutions. The important point, however, is that it seems by now generally accepted in the literature that the inscriptions and the reliefs fulfilled a function in the institutionalization of the empire and were not merely dictated by the personal whims of the kings. Research on how this ideological

programme was parcelled out over the huge empire and on how it functioned in contact with the cultures of the peripheral areas, still continues (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1990). Especially seals and coins are interesting subjects for further investigation. Such easily portable objects must have contributed substantially to the diffusion of the imperial ideology (Root 1985; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1990). For the integration of these results into a syncretical view of the Persian empire, the Early State model has already proven to be very helpful. It has in particular contributed to direct attention away from the personalities of the king to the structural mechanisms at work in the developing empire.

Conclusion

It is not easy to assess in what way an anthropological model has been useful in historical research. I started with a description of an at one time not very uncommon attitude amongst ancient historians towards anthropology. This attitude is now fortunately far less common, but the enthusiasm of historians for anthropology is not yet consistently matched by the development of theoretical tools. Natalie Zemon Davis (1981) mentions in a discussion of this subject four ways in which anthropological studies can be useful to historians: 1) close observation of living processes of social interaction, 2) interesting ways of interpreting symbolic behaviour, 3) suggestions about how the parts of a social system fit together and 4) material from cultures very different from those which historians are studying.

It is clear that in both last ways the Early State discussions have been very helpful to the study of the Achaemenid empire: through the case-studies on which the model was constructed it opened wider perspectives and the model itself gave an example of how pieces could fit together in a state. Most importantly, it provided conceptual alternatives to the dominant model that ancient historians and classicists are most accustomed to and subconsciously make use of, namely that of the Roman empire. By its foundation on a wide range of case-studies and by its discussion of the theoretical implications, the Early State debate has benefitted the understanding of the Persian empire.

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